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Challenges of Adult Learners: A Case Study of Full Time Postgraduates Students

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Abstract

This study reports on a study that investigates the challenges faced by the adult learners in one of the course in the post graduate's class at Universiti Teknologi Mara. The study was aimed to investigate the challenges faced by the adult students and how do these adult students cope with these challenges. This case study is adopting a qualitative case study and using convenience sampling in order to choose its sample. A number of 20 students of part 2 and part 4 of postgraduate students whom are currently sitting for EDU 714 (Adult Education) paper were chosen. In obtaining data for this research, a simple survey was conducted and as to triangulate the data, a semi-structured interview was also conducted. The findings of this study revealed that the biggest challenge faced by the student is challenges within themselves followed by time, financial and families. Therefore, it is necessary for those parties to take further steps to enhance conducive learning environment for the adult learners to ensure good achievement in the area of study.

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Keywords; Challenges; Adult Learners; Conducive Learning

1. Introduction

The numbers of adults continuing back their study in University are increasing semester by semester. In Malaysia, the traditional way of enrolling to university is through Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia (STPM), Matriculation and Diploma graduates. In other words, learners are following the pattern by continuing their study from one level to another after their SPM or STPM. It is difficult to continue

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study without one of these qualifications. From time to time and up to now, the entry into university are becoming more accessible through variety of means such as the PKPG (Program Khas Pensiswazahan Guru), out campus programme, distance learning, Open University and flexible learning programme. By this, the population in the university is changing where the presence of the older or mature students are populating the campus instead of the traditional age undergraduates (Brown, 2002 as cited in Habibah, 2006).

These adult students are different from the traditional age students in many aspects. One of the main differences is the challenges that they face once they decide to further their education. The traditional age students also face many challenges but it is definitely not similar to the challenges faced by the adult students. The methodologies used in teaching these adult learners are different and the roles of lecturer are very important in making the class more welcoming for the students to discuss and participate. Adults have different needs, motivations and also constraint in their life. Most of the adults are working and married and they have to give tremendous commitment to these two aspects in life.

The motivation to do this study was due to the observations in post graduate class of EDU 714 (Adult Education) where students face various difficulties in completing the assignments. The students also could not finish the assigned readings on time and frequently asked for the submission date of assignment to be pushed backwards. Other than that, students also seemed to have completed the assignment in a hurried way and sometimes did not produce quality in the work they have done. In other words, they could not complete the task as what expected by the lecturer. Furthermore, some students are also frequently absent from class for several reasons. All these situations made us thinking deeply what the causes to these entire situations are or can easily be said as what are the challenges or problems faced by these adult students and how they cope with the problem.

Several students in the class stated that commitment in career as one of the reason for them to frequently miss the class. Other than that, commitment to family members such as spouses and children and also long journey from home or office to the class was among the problems faced by the adults.

This paper is based on a small scale qualitative study which aimed to examine the challenges faced by the adult students in the EDU 714's (Adult Education) class. The research recognizes the fact that these voices of the adult students in the class need to be heard in order to fully understand the challenges and difficulty faced by them.

1.1 The Research Purpose

The purpose of the research was to investigate the challenges and difficulties faced by the full time adult students in the course of EDU714 (Adult Education) after several years of working, having family and other commitments. The assumption underlying this study is that the problems faced by these students are different from the problems typically faced by the traditional undergraduate students. Specifically, this research was directed by the following questions:

- What are the challenges faced by the adult students?
- How do these adult students cope with these challenges?

1.2 Significance of the study

The study serves significance to:

- the body of knowledge in considering all of the aspects for adult students specifically the university and the lecturer teaching the adult students

1.3 Limitations of the study

The study on its own has some limitations. First, the numbers of respondents was too small that was 20 respondents. However, we managed to get only 15 feedbacks in return. Second the time constrained. The adult students were given quite a short time to complete the task given during our group presentation of the same topic blocks to adult learning where every student in the class were asked before the presentation start about the problems or challenges they face in learning.

2. Literature Review

In literature, various definitions to adult learning have been explored and written among various professionals. In this literature review, we will look at the definitions of challenges to adult education and also the types of challenges that have been widely reported in literature.

2.1 Types of Challenges to Adult Learning

There are several barriers or challenges that hinder an adult learner in learning. Cross (1981) identified barriers to adult learning as (1) situational, (2) institutional and (3) dispositional. In regards to that Potter and Alderman (1992) added academic factors as the fourth barrier in adult learning (in MacKeracher, Suart & Potter, 2006). Habibah (2006) categorized barriers in learning as (1) personal challenges, (2) professional challenges and (3) academic challenges.

2.2 Situational Barriers

Situational barriers is defined as a type of barrier which consists of a broad spectrum of circumstantial conditions that hampers an adult learner's ability to gain access to and pursue learning opportunities (MacKeracher, Suart & Potter, 2006). The types of situational barriers would include personal challenges as mentioned by Habibah (2006) which includes multiple responsibilities at home, family, children, lack of affordable childcare services and lack of support from others. Most literature listed these as major situational barriers that can be related to working women. It is also obvious that a majority of researches done focuses on working women who continued education in higher education. This is supported by Heenan (2002) that "women are the primary carers of young children and older people. They are responsible for the majority of domestic work such as cooking and cleaning" (as cited in Habibah, 2006).

2.3 Institutional Barriers

Institutional barriers consist of limitations regarding methods institutions use to design, deliver and administer learning activities (MacKeracher, Suart & Potter, 2006). It is to be claimed that these types of barriers are biased and are against the needs of adult learners. The types of institutional barriers that can related to this includes the issues of providing financial support to learners in order to pay for tuition fees, resources needed for learning activities, a general lack of support services at times and places suitable to adult learners; and recognition of prior learning and previously obtained academic credentials (MacKeracher, Suart & Potter, 2006).

2.4 Dispositional Barriers

Dispositional or also known as attitudinal barriers relate to learners' inner feelings and their perceptions of their ability to register, attend and successfully complete learning activities. The dispositional or also known as attitudinal barriers most frequently discussed in the literature includes low self-esteem, negative attitudes about being an adult learner for instance being too old, too busy, too tired, too sick, not smart enough, being not rich enough, don't have enough time, don't need any more education, don't have adequate language skills, and being not interested in the programme (MacKeracher, Suart & Potter, 2006).

2.5 Academic Barriers

Academic barriers relate to the skills that are essential to successful learning. Literacy and computer-related skills, the ability to access and understand information, critical and reflective thinking skills, and skills in writing essays, examinations and tests are among the many types of academic barriers. Academic skills that are not mastered in childhood and adolescence remain as problems for adult learners are the most frequently discussed in literature (MacKeracher, Suart & Potter, 2006).

Literature review has also identified two additional groups of barriers which are pedagogical and employment training (MacKeracher, Suart & Potter, 2006). Pedagogical barriers are largely based on lack of understanding on the part of instructors, facilitators and administrators about: how adults learn; the benefits of learner-centered teaching and active learning; diversity among adult learners in terms of learning style and preferred types of learning activities and information; and adult learners' needs for relevancy in content, recognition of prior learning, respect from others, and a responsive lifelong learning system (MacKeracher, Suart & Potter, 2006).

2.6 Previous Studies

In previous researches found, Carp, Peterson & Roelfs (1973) had listed the types of barriers in order of importance: cost, limited time, refusing to attend school full-time, home responsibilities, job responsibilities and the amount of time to finish the programme (as cited in Malhotra & Shapero, 2007). Other than that, several studies in the UK have confirmed that situational and institutional barriers form a major constraint to adult learning (Blaxter & Tight, 1993; Merrifield, Macynntyre & Osaigbovo, 2000; Schuetze & Slowey, 2000 as cited in Buchler, Castle, Osman & Walters, 2007). It was also revealed that the cost of tuition, learning materials and self-financed is a major factor (Buchler, Castle, Osman & Walters, 2007).

There has also been a study where Hall & Donaldson (1997) looked at women without high school educations. Early pregnancies, economic status, and the amount of education of the women's parents were found to have played a role in choosing not to participate. Other factors include not having a support system and lack of time, information, and child care. Hall and Donaldson also noted "lack of voice," meaning how a woman feels about herself and how she can express herself (in Merriam and Caffarella, 1999 as cited from <http://www.fsu.edu/~adult-ed/jenny/learning.html>). One's sex can also determine if and how much one will participate in education. Women tend to participate less than men and their participation is qualitatively different from men's. However, this overlaps with geographic conditions where it shows that women in developed nations may participate as much as men. In less developed countries, women often receive very little opportunity to participate. Even in wealthier nations, men are still more likely to hold higher and better paid positions than women, and are thus more likely to receive further and better training (<http://www.fsu.edu/~adult-ed/jenny/learning.html>).

In coping with challenges and barriers in adult learning, Rogers (2002) had outlined few mechanisms which he calls 'ego-defense' mechanism for adult learners to adopt and adapt in order to cope with the challenges which specifically on personal challenges. Some of the ego-defense mechanism outlined by Rogers, (2002) are fantasy, compensation, identification with others, projection onto others of our own impulses and traits, rationalization, repression, sublimation, displacement, negativism and reaction formation.

3. Methodology

This case study is adopting a qualitative case study and using convenience sampling in order to choose its sample. The researchers decided to choose convenience sampling due to the availability and suitability of the sample for the study. Researchers had chosen a number of 20 students of part 2 and part 4 of postgraduate students whom are currently sitting for EDU 714 (Adult Education) paper.

3.1 Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

In order to investigate the challenges faced by these participants, a simple survey was conducted and as to triangulate the data, a semi-structured interview was conducted.

3.2 The Survey

According to Frankeal & Wallen (2008), a survey is done when the researchers are interested in the opinion of a group of people about a particular topic or issue. Thus, for this case study, researchers had conducted a simple survey in order to collect data on the challenges faced by the participants in adult learning. Before the survey was conducted, participants were first introduced to the topic of 'Blocks to Adult Learning' in their EDU 714 (Adult Education) class in order to facilitate them to respond to the survey.

Participants were then assigned to jot down the challenges that they faced in adult learning on a piece of paper. The papers were then collected and the data was analyzed. The data was categorized under certain themes.

3.3 The Interview

Four participants from the sample were interviewed in order to triangulate the data. These four participants are respectively representing the status of the entire sample. All of the participants interviewed are active respondents and had given their full cooperation and commitment throughout the interview session. The participants are full-time Masters of Education students and all of them are female. Each participant will later describe individually to describe their status. Each participant has been given a pseudonym in order to protect their identity and to ensure confidentiality.

STUDENT A

Student A is a single lady. She lives with her parents in Shah Alam. She graduated in 2008 from one of the public university in Shah Alam in the course of TESL. After graduated, she has worked in an institution and at that time she realized that she has to improve herself by continuing her study in the area concerned. She decided to enroll back to University in December 2008 and right now she is in her second semester.

STUDENT B

Student B is a single lady. She has been living in Shah Alam with her friends since 2004. She obtained her degree from the public university in Shah Alam in 2008. Then, right after completing her study in May 2008, she worked very hard to search for a good job and finally she got a job as an English Teacher in one of the private university in Klang Valley. She is working in a normal working hours from 830 am to 530pm but as an educator there are some flexibility in working hours. Furthermore, her director is very supportive especially for those who are pursuing their study. The staff is allowed to do the assignment if they have no class and also to meet the supervisor or group mates for discussion. In other words, her working place is very supportive for her in doing her master. At the same time, she need to balance as the workload in the office is quite high plus she is the course

leader of a course. Teaching for not less than 15 hours, preparing all the assessments including the quizzes, midterm examination and final examination, invigilating students in the examination and marking all the exam papers especially the final exam papers where she does not only has to mark her own class but all of the classes including the regional centers' papers. In addition, she is also doing part time jobs as a teacher in a tuition centre as the cost of living in the area is very high and her only salary in the Private university is not that enough to support her life especially in a situation where she herself has to pay for the postgraduate fees. She decided to pursue study by her own self as when she looks around in the educational field, she realized that there is a must to pursue study for the objective of career advancement

STUDENT C

Student C is a full-time career woman whom working from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. She is married without children at the moment. She had graduated in a local university in 2002. After possess few years of working experiences in, she decided to further her study realizing that having higher qualification in academic will help her in her career advancement. She is so lucky to have a very supportive and understanding husband that always support her in her career and study.

STUDENT D

Student D is a full-time teacher in a government secondary school. She is married with three children. She had graduated her first degree in 1999. In her school, she holds a lot of responsibilities including teaching examination classes. She decided to pursue study in order to get career advancement as she has her own ambition and always wanted to be more than a teacher. Having a family with three children to take care of is the biggest challenge that she faced. She has to juggle all the time between family, school and study.

After the data from the interview was collected, the data was then analyzed to investigate the themes that appeared which can be classified and match to the survey data collected.

4. Findings

This case study, researchers had conducted a simple survey in order to collect data on the challenges faced by the participants in adult learning. Fig. 1 shows bar chart data on the challenges faced by the participants in adult learning.

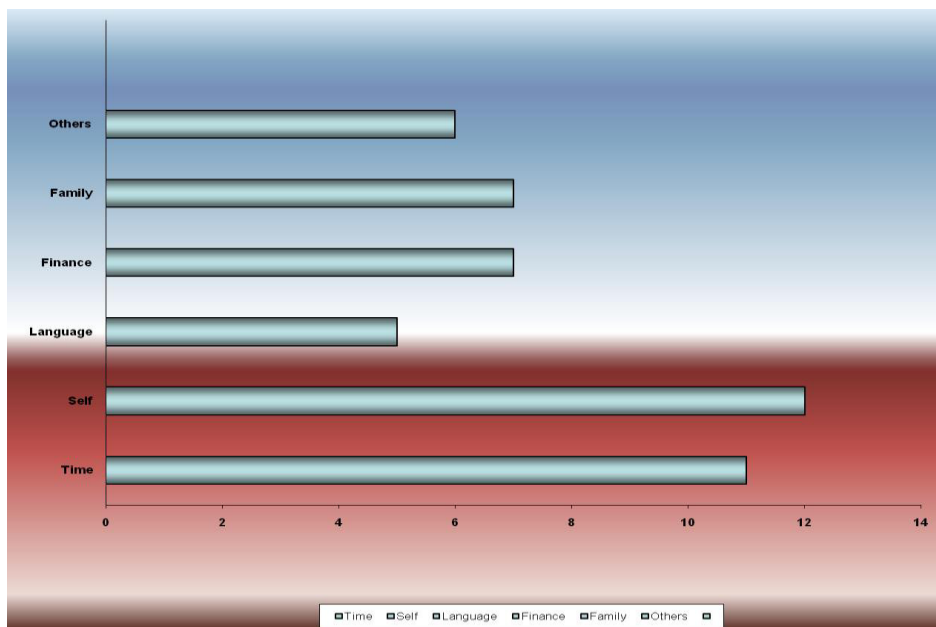


Fig. 1 shows bar chart data on the challenges faced by the participants in adult learning.

4.1 The Challenges Faced by Full Time Post Graduate's Students in EDU714's Class

Based on the case study, it was found that the biggest challenge faced by the student is challenges within themselves. These challenges are categorized under dispositional challenges that identified by Cross (1981 as cited in MacKeracher, Stuart & Potter, 2006). Cross identified that dispositional challenges relate to learners' inner feelings and their perceptions of their ability to register, attend and successfully complete learning activities. Most of the students have the **anxiety** towards their learning. These includes fear of not completing assignment on time, fear of having lower grades as their expectation is very high, fear of not meeting the lecturers' expectations and also fear to be isolated and neglected in the group or sometimes they tend to feel small to compare themselves with other members of the group. MacKeracher, Stuart & Potter, (2006) had the same ideas of these attitudinal challenges as they described these challenges which includes low self-esteem, negative attitudes about being an adult learner for instance being too old, too busy, too tired, too sick, not smart enough, being not rich enough, don't have enough time, don't need any more education, don't have adequate language skills, and not interested (MacKeracher, Stuart & Potter, 2006). According to one of the interviewee:

"I often feel so small in the class when I compare myself to my classmates who have a lot of experiences in their field."

One of them also claimed:

"I'm very forgetful lately....probably I am too old to study and perhaps at this moment I should have sit and relax with my children rather than cracking my head to do the assignment."

The second tremendous challenge faced by the students is **time**. Majority of them claimed that it is very hard for them to manage their time between family, career and study. As a result, they often sacrifice their resting hour or their pleasure time in order to complete their tasks. According to one of the interviewee:

“I felt like 24 hours just not enough for me. I have to sacrifice my rest hour to do my assignment.”

In this study, it was found that the third great challenges that the student faces in this course is the situational factors that is family and financial.

Further on, **financial** is the third challenge as majority of the students are paying the fees by themselves. Only a small percentage of the students which are the Art students' fees are paid by the Ministry of Education as they are sponsored by the government. The fees that the students have to pay are quite high and for those working they have to save 15 to 20% of their salary monthly. Furthermore, students need to pay it at one time once the semester starts which means they would need to prepare a large amount of money at one time as there are no payment installment schemes for it. Again, one of the interviewee expressed that:

‘To be honest, I will end up stressing when I think of paying my master fee. At this age I don't want to put the burden on my parents as it is my own responsibility. Every semester, I have to pay nearly RM 2000 and I have to save my salary about 400 per month and it is a bit burden for me as my salary is not that high. That is the main reason why I have to find other alternatives by doing part time job and here I really need to balance my time between full time job, postgraduate's classes and part time jobs.’

Another interviewee admitted that:

“Master's fee is a great burden for me as a working lady with family. I can afford it but at the same time I have to be very careful with whatever I spend as my mind keeps on reminding me about the fees which I should pay at the beginning of the semester. I have to cut budget for my shopping and travelling even though it is my interest”

These results is in line with the study done by Buchler, Castle, Osman & Walters, (2007) it was also revealed that the cost of tuition & learning materials, often self-financed is a major factor.

As discussed in chapter 2, Carp, Peterson & Roelfs (1973) had listed the types of barriers in order of importance: cost, limited time, refusing to attend school full-time, home responsibilities, job responsibilities and the amount of time to finish the programme (as cited in Malhotra & Shapero, 2007).

It is in parallel to the findings of this case study. Even the order of importance is different from Carp, Peterson and Roelfs findings, but most of the challenges faced appear in the findings as portrays in the chart above. The most demanding challenge that are faced by adult learners in EDU 714's class is their personal challenges which has been described as multiple responsibilities at home: **family**, children, lack of affordable childcare services and lack of support from others (Habibah, 2006). Most of the students are having difficulty in order to prioritize between their family, career and study. As a result they sometimes will felt guilty to their family especially their children because they have to neglect them in order to complete their assignments. According to one or the interviewee:

“I felt guilty towards my children. I am often to busy to attend to them when they need my attention...my husband was always the one to help me cope with the children”

One of them who is still single, claim to have different point of personal challenges.

“I admit it’s such an advantage for me to be a single lady while furthering my studies, but I also have parents to take care of...As a result, I have to juggle between my priorities in order to fulfill their needs as well as mine”

The fifth challenge adult learners in EDU 714 faced would be in terms of a various combination of **other challenges**. Those barriers include: administration of faculty, resources, stress, career, knowledge, experience, journey or commuting and finally the ability to digest of what is being learned.

In terms of career, a majority of the students in the class are currently working in the educational area as an educator and only small percentage working in an office. Some of the students are unemployed as they found out that they have no time to focus in the study if they are working. Career is one of the challenges as the students need to be committed to their job. They have to complete the heavy workload in the office and attend meetings which results in them being late for class. Working itself is a heavy duty especially on a busy day where sometimes students felt very tired and decides to miss the class as they believe that they could not even concentrate as they attend class with an exhausted mind and also physical. According to one of the interviewee:

I have to miss the class since I often feel too exhausted working for the whole day especially on a busy day where there are courses or meetings to be attended’

The final challenge that the adult learners face in adult learning would be **language**. Some of them expressed worry in being unable to converse well in English which becomes a barrier for them especially during presentations and also when expressing ideas in the classroom.

5.0 Recommendations

There are some recommendation that introduced by previous researchers in order to help adult learners to find their own mechanism to cope with these challenges. As mentioned in chapter 2, Rogers (2002) had outlined few mechanisms which he calls ‘ego-defense’ mechanism for adult learners to adopt and adapt in order to cope with the challenges which specifically on personal challenges. Some of the ego-defense mechanism outlined by Rogers, (2002) are fantasy, compensation, identification with others, projection onto others of our own impulses and traits, rationalization, repression, sublimation, displacement, negativism and reaction formation. However, Rogers (2002) also said that all the ego-defense mechanisms that he outlined are just some recommendation for adult learners to try out as well as adapt it to the adult learners’ situation.

Based on the study, here are some recommendations for future actions. First, it is recommended to the adult students itself that they need to adapt and find solutions to their problems. As what we know adults are independent and so they have to make the decisions by their own. They should question themselves on the purpose of continuing their study and take every challenge as a motivator for them to improve in their studies and life. Next, in term of time, it is recommended for the university and the lecturer to be more flexible which would allow students to attend class. Other than that, lecturer should be more considerate when it comes to the due date of the assignment.

Next, it is highly recommended that the family members of the students to be given a briefing session that provides them with the information about all the responsibilities that the students need to face so that they can be more understanding towards the students obligation as a student. In other words, students should make a way for their family members to understand them as they have new responsibility. Furthermore, to assist the students with financial barriers, it is recommended for the university to allow the students to pay their fees in installments, so the burden will be less for them. Finally, university should conduct more language workshops for students with low proficiency level of English with the objective to help them improving their language skills which are very important as a postgraduate student.

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